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ABSTRACT

This study examined retention at Christopher Newport University (CNU) in Newport News, Virginia, focusing on the demographic characteristics of those students who left the university as well as the reasons why they left. A total of 159 students who had attended CNU during the 1994-95 academic year but who did not re-enroll in the fall of 1995 were surveyed via telephone. Attempts were made to reach 100 percent of non-returning minority students and approximately 50 percent of non-returning white students. It was found that the average Scholastic Assessment Tests (SAT) verbal score was 480 and the math score was 465 for the non-returnees, and that 92 percent indicated that they worked 10-40 hours per week. Most of the non-returnees initially came to CNU because of its convenient location and low tuition. Important in the respondents' decision not to return to CNU were financial problems (46 percent), family complications (30 percent), work/schedule conflicts (29 percent), and poor academic performance (24 percent). Sixty-one percent of the non-returnees indicated that they planned to eventually return to CNU. The results are discussed in light of the development of more effective retention policies for the university. (Contains 10 references.) (MDM)

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FROM NUMBERS TO ACTION:

A PRELIMINARY STUDY OF RETENTION

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From Numbers to Action:

A Preliminary Study of Retention

ABSTRACT

This is a preliminary study of retention at a surburban university in southeastern Virginia. One hundred and fifty-nine non-returnees were surveyed. This paper presents the findings to several questions: (1) What are the demographic and special characteristics of the students who do not return to the university? (2) What factors are important in a students' decision to go to college? (3) Why do these students initially attend CNU? (4) Why students do not return to CNU? (5) How do students fell about CNU? and (6) What do the students want the administration to know about the university? The findings seem to indicate that many of the factors influencing student retention are an inherent component of the nature of the University: (1) commuter institution; (2) high percentage of non-traditional aged students; and (3) low to moderate admissions criteria. A second section of the paper identifies questions, and suggestions or recommendations of the committee for moving from numbers (the results) to action (plans, policies, and procedures to retain students). Given the noted limitations of this study, it can still serve as a model for studying retention at institutions of a similar nature.

INTRODUCTION

Recent trends in higher education rendered necessary renewed attention on student retention. As early as 1987, Tinto's research on student attrition found that approximately 40% of all college entrants leave higher education without earning a degree, 75% of these students drop out in the first two years of college, and 50% of a typical entering class will not graduate from that college (Gerdes & Mallenckrodt, 1994). According to Astin (1978), who found similar results much earlier, this type of data provides an argument for more investment in student retention (Catalano & Eddy, 1993). He indicates that any change deterring students from dropping out can affect three classes of students at once, whereas any change in recruiting practices can affect only one class in a given year. From this perspective, investing resources to prevent dropping out may be more cost effective than applying the same resources to more vigorous recruitment efforts.

Current data on college students project an increase in enrollment at colleges and universities nationwide except for the 1996-97 academic school year (Chronicle of Higher Education, 1995). Similarly, the State Council of Higher Education in Virginia (SCHEV) projects an increase in Virginia college and university enrollments after this same period. Over the last two years, freshmen

enrollment at Christopher Newport University (CNU) has increased, however, the number of students re-enrolling during this same period has decreased. Given the current drop in CNU's enrollment figures, it is necessary for the University to examine retention and establish programs and policies which can affect consistent student enrollment. Ultimately, it is hoped that these programs and policies will increase the efficiency with which CNU students achieve their academic goals.

Maintaining student enrollment is a complex concept that involves several factors influencing why students drop out. In light of the specific characteristics of CNU, a review of the literature has revealed several useful and beneficial sources (Luckie, 1991; Kinlach, Frost & MacKay, 1993; Greene, Sturgeon, & Prather, 1982; Ryland, Riordan & Brach, 1994; Catalano & Eddy, 1993; Colorado Commission on Higher Education, 1992; Gerdes & Mallenckrodt, 1994; and Wilder, 1993). These studies and others provided important suggestions for the study of retention at CNU. Specifically, Luckie (1991) intimated that before institutions can begin to develop retention policies and programs, they must find the answers to at least three questions: (1) Why students initially attend their college?, (2) Why students do not return to their

college?, and (3) How do the non-returnees feel about the college after they leave. Having this information may prove beneficial to recruitment as well as retention efforts.

THE PURPOSE

Recognizing the complexity of student enrollment/retention, CNU decided to examine retention. In the summer of 1995, the Dean of the College of Social Science and Professional Studies asked a faculty member in the Psychology Department to chair a task force to study retention and advising at CNU (hereafter referred to as the Retention and Advising Committee). The committee consisted of faculty from the College of Social Sciences and Professional Studies (SS&PS) and Arts and Humanities (A&H), and administrative faculty from the Offices of Admissions, Career & Counseling Services, Institutional Research and the Registrar. The group was asked to determine if CNU has a retention problem, to highlight possible causes for the loss of returning students, and to submit recommendations for alleviating this problem, if there is a problem. After reviewing the literature on retention, the re-enrollment figures, graduation rates at CNU, and anecdotal data on CNU students, the Retention and Advising (R&A) committee decided that the University does have a retention problem.

The committee, along with the Dean of SS&PS, decided the best way to obtain information about students was via survey. The committee decided to poll non-returnees first (as suggested by Luckie, 1991). The results may provide significant insights for developing retention policies, and serve as a valuable resource for recruitment at the University.

Drawing on Luckie's (1991) aforementioned suggestions, the committee developed a survey to obtain answers to the following questions: (1) What are the demographic and special characteristics of the students who do not return to the university? (2) What factors are important in a student's decision to go to college? (3) Why do these students initially attend CNU? (4) Why students do not return to CNU? (5) How do students feel about CNU?, and (6) What do the students want the administration to know about the University? This report represents only the preliminary findings from some descriptive data collected on a sample of full-time non-returnees (classified and unclassified). Given the full-time status of these students, any inferences from the data should be made with caution. Additional analyses and comparative results will be presented in a final report on retention.

THE UNIVERSITY

Christopher Newport University is a comprehensive, coeducational, state-assisted institution located in suburban Newport News, Virginia--midway between Williamsburg and Norfolk. It is the youngest comprehensive university in the Commonwealth of Virginia. At the same time, it came into being as part of the oldest academic institution in the Commonwealth--The College of William and Mary. Established as a two-year college, CNU became a four year, baccalaureate institution in 1971 and, in July of 1977, became a totally independent College. In 1991, Christopher Newport received university status and began offering graduate programs in July. The University remains largely a commuter college--with only approximately 10% of the student population residing in the Residence Hall.

PROCEDURE

In the fall of 1995, the R&A committee developed a survey based upon research on student retention. A copy of the survey can be found in Appendix A. A description of the study and all necessary documents were sent to the chairman of CNU's Human Subjects Committee, and approval was granted by phone October 5, 1995. After receiving approval, the survey was pretested on eight non-returnees. The results of the pretesting indicated a need for only minor ·

adjustments. After making these adjustments, the committee submitted the survey for use. To insure a significant response rate, telephone interviews were conducted by students employed in the CNU Development Office. As a part of the preparation for their job, these students underwent intensive training in cultivating rapport, maintaining professional courtesy, protecting confidentiality, etc. Each student had to practice the survey with the supervisor (Chairwoman of R&A) before being allowed to call non-returnees. The Chairwoman provided comments about the script (the importance of adhering to the script) and addressed other issues that arose during the practice session.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION OF SURVEY

The results and discussion will be presented in the order of the research questions posed in the Purpose section of this report.

Question 1: What are the demographic and special characteristics of the students who do not return to CNU?

The Population and Sample

The population for this report consisted of 748 full-time classified and unclassified non-returning CNU students. In this case, non-returning students were defined as those who attended CNU in the fall of 1994 or the spring of 1995 and did not re-enroll in the fall of 1995. An overview of the demographic

characteristics (by race, sex, and classification) can be found in Table 1. The R&A committee's initial projection was to obtain a sample of 210 non-returning students. This represented 1/4 of the white non-returning students and 1/2 of black non-returning students, since they were the largest two groups of non-returnees. However, complications (disconnected phones, moves, etc.) with reaching some of our non-returning students resulted in an attempt to reach 100% of the CNU minority population (Asians, Blacks, Hispanics) of non-returnees and a little over 50% of the white non-returnee.

After attempting to reach 548 non-returning full-time students, pollsters compiled a final sample of 159 students. The mean age for this group was 23.57 years. Overall, the sample was representative of the total full-time population of non-returning students on sex, classification, and race variables. The demographic characteristics of the sample can be found in Table 1. While the sample appears to be representative of the total population of non-returnees in regard to race, sex, and classification, the significant number of disconnected phones may indicate this sample is not completely representative of the population of full-time non-returnees. Again, the committee cautions the readers of this report to view the findings in light of this information.

Various attempts were made to collect information on the vast number of

students with disconnected or out-of-service phones. While we were unable to obtain survey responses from this group, we were able to collect some admissions data on these students. The results of these comparisons will not be presented here, but will be available for the final report on retention.

In general, we found that almost 100% (99.4%) of the respondents were admitted to CNU as residents of the state of Virginia. Approximately 58% of this sample of non-returnees entered CNU directly from high school. An additional 15.1% transferred to CNU from another four-year institution, with another 13.8% entering CNU after working for a few years. Most of the respondents (83.6%) were day students who lived at home (61%). One hundred and fourteen (72%) of the respondents worked while attending CNU, with 92% of the 114 students indicating they worked approximately 10-40 hours per week. Eighty-seven percent of the respondents were single, and only 8% indicated they had children under the age of 18 while attending CNU.

Since there is some research (Kinlach, Frost and MacKay, 1993) that suggests that student retention may be influenced by students' academic preparedness, an overview of the respondents' academic preparedness will be presented in this section. Student academic preparedness was measured by SAT verbal and math scores, high school rank, high school GPA, and admissions

limitations. For this sample, the average SAT verbal score was 480 and the math average was 465 (recentered scores). Twenty-six percent of this sample graduated in the uppermost quartile (rankings = 1 to 25) as indicated by their high school rank, with another 51% being in the second quartile (26 to 50 ranking). The mean high school GPA for this group was 2.61 on a 4.0 scale. Based on admissions data, 72% of these students entered CNU with no admissions limitation. Using CNU's admission standards (SAT verbal = 480, SAT math = 440, and high school or transfer GPA = 2.0), the committee finds that these students at least appeared academically prepared for coursework at CNU.

Question 2: What factors are important in a student's decision to go to college?

Results from the survey indicate that many respondents came to college for external reasons. To get a better job, in order to make more money (93%); to obtain a Bachelor's degree (90%); to gain a general education and appreciation of ideas (88%); to prepare for graduate or professional school (67%); and to appease parents (61%) were the leading factors indicated by the survey respondents. While many of these variables may reflect an external motivation for attending college (parental pressure, a desire to get a better job and make

more money, obtaining a B.A. degree), a study in the Chronicle of Higher Education (1995) suggests that CNU students are relatively similar to other students as is indicated in the national norms. However, further analyses revealed that while the two groups seem to have matriculated for relatively similar reasons, the CNU sample reported significantly higher percentages on these variables than those indicated in the national norms. See Table 2 for a comparison of CNU survey respondents to national norms. In addition, it needs to be noted that many of the students did not indicate the following variables were very important in their decision to go to college: (1) inability to find a job (10.1%); (2) desire to leave home (22.6%); and (3) encouragement from a mentor or role model (25.2%). Looking at these results from a preliminary perspective, one may glean an important bit of information. It may be that these non-returnees are externally motivated and therefore likely to place college second. Thus, in the face of any kind of adversity-- academic, financial, or personal--- college may be one of the options CNU students are willing to delay or forego entirely.

Question 3: Why did these students initially attend CNU?

In several instances, the data indicated that the vast majority of the respondents chose CNU for very practical and logical reason: (1) convenient

location (90%), (2) low tuition (76%), (3) course offerings (75%); and (4) accommodation to work schedule (72%). Comparing these results to a national survey of freshmen revealed some dissimilarity on this question. Nationally, the following variables were perceived as important for selecting a college: (1) the good academic reputation of the institution (49%); (2) graduates ability to secure good jobs (42%); and (3) size of the college (36%) (Chronicle of Higher Education, 1995).

On the other hand, respondents did not indicate that the following variables were important in their decision to go to college: the attendance of their friends (14.5%); the advice of counselor, teachers, principals, etc. (17%); and the advice of parents or relatives (27.7%). This information may provide significant insights to this group of respondents. Respondents may have made decisions about going to college, particularly CNU, relatively independent of the some of the traditional social support systems (parents, counselors, teachers, etc.) Further insight may be provided when one compares this group of non-returnees with returnees on this question.

It is important to note that 74% of the respondents did intend to complete a degree at CNU when they first enrolled. This means that approximately 26% of the students may be optouts (never intending to complete a degree at this

university; Luckie, 1991). Even so, approximately 3/4 of these respondents are leaving CNU for reasons other than transferring to another college.

Question 4: Why do students leave CNU?

Important in the respondents' decision not to return to CNU were: (1) financial problems (46%); (2) family complications (30%); (3) work schedule/conflicts (29%); and (4) poor academic performance (24%). While these reasons do not seem initially to provide overwhelmingly high percentages, a closer look at this data indicates that two factors, financial problems and academic performance, may have greater significance than a first glance may provide.

Financially speaking, almost 76% of the students indicated that one of the important reasons they selected CNU was the low cost of attending the University. When questioned about the decision not to return to CNU, 46% of the students indicated that financial problems were a contributing factor. Additional responses also seem to indicate the need for a closer look at this variable. For example, when students were asked what would motivate them to return to CNU, 38% said more financial aid. In the open-ended questions, some students indicated they were currently working to save enough money to return to the University. This seems consistent with the finding that 72% selected CNU so

they could work while attending. In addition, 56% of the students indicated that they used their own money to attend the University. Other sources of financial assistance most often used by our students were: (1) parental assistance (57.5%); (2) loans (54.2%); and (3) grants (40.5%). While research on the impact of various types of financial assistance on retention and graduation is not conclusive, the data from non-returning respondents in this study suggests respondents made some sacrifices in their academic pursuits, for example, working more hours to obtain monies necessary to attend college.

Another factor that influenced students' decisions to leave was poor academic performance. A cursory look at the data may lead one to think that this variable was not that important in the respondents' decision to leave CNU. When students were asked about their reasons for leaving CNU, 24% indicated poor academic performance as a reason for not returning to the University. However, follow-up analyses using the University's guidelines for academic probation indicated that 34% of these students had GPAs consistent with academic probation. As well, when one reviews the respondents' overall GPA at CNU, one finds a mean of 2.18. This average is approaching probation. Examining the respondents cumulative GPA by classification, the committee

found some significant differences ($F = 10.18$; $p = .001$, $df = 4$) Specifically, they found that the average freshman GPA ($X = 1.50$) is below the University's standard for academic probation.

Additionally, results indicate that the following variables do not play a major role in the decision to leave CNU: (1) relocation (7%); (2) difficulty registering for major courses (13%) or general courses (12%); (3) a lack of career goals or purpose (11.6%); and (4) inadequate advising (14%). Again, one must be cautious when applying these results to the overall population, since data analyses have not been conducted to determine if the sample of non-returnees is completely representative of the total population of non-returnees.

It is important to keep in mind that while many of CNU students leave, further questioning indicated that 97 out of 159 (61%) of the students planned to return to CNU. Out of the 97 who indicated an intent to return to CNU, 75% said they will return within one year, most indicating the very next semester (Spring, 1995). Of the students who indicated they do not plan to return to CNU, many suggested that the following factors may be reasons for reconsidering their decision: (1) more financial aid (38%); (2) better course offering (38%); and (3) a more flexible course registration process (33%).

Question 5: How do students feel about CNU?

Overall, the findings in this area were extremely disappointing to the committee. Students were asked to rate their overall satisfaction with CNU. The mean rating for satisfaction with CNU was 6.79 with a standard deviation of 1.78. An examination of the rating did not differ significantly by race, sex, classification, or transfer status. If Luckie's (1991) contention (that how students feel about the college after they leave is an important variable to consider in a retention policy) is correct, then this rating may indicate the need for further study to determine with which aspects of CNU are the students most satisfied or dissatisfied. Results from this type of study may provide insights for corrective actions.

Question 6: What do students want us to know about CNU?

In general, students made both positive and negative comments about CNU. When questioned, 41% of the students indicated that they had encountered a person who was particularly helpful. Of that 41%, 75% indicated a faculty member was particularly important, and some even named the professor. An additional 14% indicated that the helpful person was a staff member. Again, since less than half indicated there was one person who was particularly helpful,

this raised serious concerns about customer service and how we are perceived by this group of respondents. This is one area where additional study for plausible explanations and remedies may be beneficial.

One open-ended question at the end of the survey may provide some insights into areas of dissatisfaction. The most often mentioned negative comments were represented in a few select statements presented here: (1) the "faculty at CNU are not concerned about the students"; (2) "I could not find my advisor"; and (3) "something needs to be done about financial aid." While open-ended responses may provide some insights, a more detailed study on retention, as well as customer satisfaction, needs to be performed.

CONCLUSIONS

While many other findings could have been derived from the preliminary data, the committee chose to concentrate on only a few general areas for now. In general, the findings seem to indicate many of the factors influencing student retention are an inherent component of the nature of the University: (1) commuter institution, (2) high percentage of non-traditional aged students, and (3) low to moderate admissions criteria. While some of the data did seem to dispel some of the myths committee members held about CNU students, the committee feels further study is necessary before definitive statements can be

made in some areas. In-depth analyses must be conducted on this data; additional surveying of the part-time non-returnees and surveying returnees must be completed before further conclusions can be drawn. In general, the committee was left with far more questions than suggestions or recommendations. A sampling of the questions follow:

1. What are the characteristics of the part-time non-returnees on these variables?
2. How does the large number of students living at home impact retention rates?
3. How does the significant number of student pollsters we were unable to contact (due to disconnected phones) impact the results of this data?
4. What does "low cost" mean to respondents?
5. What percentage of the students who graduated stopped out for a period of time?
6. What is it that faculty and staff do that appears or is perceived as helpful by the students?
7. Is it useful to examine only the freshman data?
8. What differences exist on these variables between students who enrolled initially at CNU vs. the students who transferred to CNU?

9. To what extent are proportionately higher females, blacks, etc. dropping out? (based on general population descriptives)
10. How can beginning students make so many decisions about education without some support with these crucial decisions?
11. Are the students who are dropping out significantly different from those who persist?

RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of the limitations of this study, it can serve as a model for studying retention at institutions with characteristics similar to CNU. This committee cautiously made the following recommendations. Any changes in policies, programs, etc., should be delayed until further analyses and additional data have been collected.

1. Initiate and support an ongoing university study of retention issues.
2. Institute a standard survey of all students who do not re-enroll after attending two consecutive, regular semesters to form an information base from which more precise action-oriented interventions might be planned.
3. Survey those students (a similar population in kind) who are still enrolled at CNU after two regular semesters to analyze their characteristics and make comparisons.

4. Require more specific information on the academic preparation of the incoming freshman class be collected: units of English, Math, Natural Sciences, Social Sciences, Foreign Languages -- so that more precise information on placement and success rates in college level courses can be analyzed.

5. Improve student access to financial aid and information about financial aid. Provide greater publicity about financial availability.

6. Ensure more structured cooperative learning strategies in freshman and sophomore level courses which assist students in making friends and creating networks with peers.

7. Publish an academic counseling newsletter or column in the Captain's Log (the campus newspaper) that offers advice for students who are struggling academically.

8. Encourage various offices on campus (financial aid, advising, admissions, registrar, career & counseling services, etc.) to provide a customer satisfaction survey of services.

9. Conduct a study of student/customer satisfaction with the University, faculty, and staff.

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Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of Population and Sample non-returnees

	Population (N/%)	Sample (N/%)
RACE		
Asians	18 / 2%	5/ 3%
Blacks	127 / 17%	35/22%
Hispanics	16 / 2%	1/ 1%
Whites	587 / 79%	118/74%
SEX		
Females	421 / 56%	80/50%
Males	327 / 44%	79/50%
CLASSIFICATION		
Freshman	243 / 32%	47/30%
Sophomore	183 / 24%	46/29%
Junior	96 / 13%	26/16%
Senior	111 / 15%	15/ 9%
Unclassified	115 / 16%	25/16%

Table 2

Comparison of CNU students to national sample of college freshmen on reasons for deciding to go to college

QUESTION	NATIONAL %	CNU%
A. To get a better job, so I can make more money	75.0%	93.1%
B. To gain a general education and an appreciation of ideas	59.4%	88.1%
C. To prepare myself for graduate or professional school	55.7%	67.3%
D. My parents wanted me to go	35.2%	60.8%
E. Wanted to get away from home	18.6%	22.6%
F. Mentor or role model encouraged me to go	13.7%	25.2%
G. I could not find a job	7.7%	10.1%